

Women and James Bond

by Michael Curtis



The story goes that a supposedly wise man said that women did not belong to the rabbinate no more than oranges belonged on the seder plate. Wise men can be wrong. There are now women rabbis, and there are oranges at the seder, symbolic of the inclusion of and contribution of women to Jewish life. At this moment in October 2021 when the film, *No Time to Die*, the 25th film featuring James Bond, it is time for wise men and women to discuss a more entertaining issue, the gender role of individuals in film as in life.

With the firm statement by the 53 year old Daniel Craig that his performance in the new film *No Time to Die* was his farewell to the iconic role of James Bond, the debate and competition has begun of who should play the role in any next Bond film. Though mainly known for his expertise in the fantasy world of the House of Commons, the leader of the British Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has addressed the fictional need by stating "I don't have a favorite Bond, but it's time for a female Bond." The more melodramatic Prime Minister Boris Johnson countered that Bond has to be a man, though he also could not name his choice.

The Labour Party in recent years has usually been wrong in policy proposals, but the suggestion that Bond, the epitome of stylized masculinity, should be female is intriguing. First, as portrayed in films by six actors from Sean Connery to Daniel Craig, Bond is a cultural touchstone. According to the American Film Institute, Bond is one of the greatest film heroes though not as prominent as Vito Corleone, the Godfather, or Indiana Jones, or Atticus Finch (*To kill a Mockingbird*). Bond is handsome, courageous, daring,

charismatic, deadly charm, dapper, cool. His inventor Ian Fleming thought of him in the original novels as resembling the pianist-songwriter Hoagy Carmichael, composer of *Stardust*. Bond has his gimmicks; vodka martini, shaken not stirred, fast cars, the Aston Martin DB5, gadgets and special effects, spectacular stunts, exotic locations, elaborate chase scenes, on land and sea, and thwarting villains who are usually stroking a white Persian cat while planning to conquer the world. The peak of Bond's influence was to appear with Queen Elizabeth in a staging of the opening ceremony of the London Summer Olympics 2012 games.

Bond, the indestructible hero is classless, ageless, popular, despite changing political and sexual mores. Yet Bond, the Royal Navy Reserve Commander who works for MI6, and in the 25th film for the CIA, is guilty of misbehavior, misogyny, rape in one film, sexism, a killer, with an obsessive love of gambling, and above all a womanizer. He is also, both explicitly and implicitly, a token of imperial nostalgia, an operative in the Cold War, fighting Smersh and Spectre, anti-communist and pro Empire, the last of imperial heroes in a post-imperial age, though curiously never at work in Berlin, Cuba, or Vietnam.

Can James Bond be a woman? Gender language has become perplexing. A recent example is that the ACLU acknowledged that changing its reference from "women" to "people" was a mistake. It apologized for altering the words of a well-known utterance of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "The decision whether or not to bear a child is central to a woman's life, to her wellbeing and dignity." The ACLU had replaced each of Ginsburg's references of women to people.

Gender complications and sexual ambiguity were central to conflict in some of Shakespeare's plays, in which cross dressing was the norm because of exclusive male theater companies in which all women's roles were played by boys.

Twelfth Night is illustrative of this with the complex story of the aristocratic born Viola, swept onto a foreign shore, who disguises herself as a man, Cesario, works for the Duke Orsino with whom she falls in love. But Orsino is in love with Olivia who falls in love with Cesario, believing her to be a man. What a plot: Viola loves Orsino who loves Orsino who loves Olivia who loves Cesario-Viola. Shakespeare does solve the problem in happy fashion.

Shakespeare also allows characters to differentiate between the male, aggressive, daring, strong, ruthless, and the female, gentle, wavering, soft. The difference is best expressed by the ambitious lady Macbeth, who sees the problem. Brave Macbeth, "well he deserves that name," is not fulfilling what is expected, and she is disappointed, "Yet do I fear thy nature, it is too full of the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way... When you durst do it (murder Duncan) then you were a man." She wants to take on the masculine role: "unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe, top full of direct cruelty. Make thick my blood." One can see her auditioning for the role of Lady Bond.

A likely substitute in the past for the role of Bond would be the most famous actress specializing in cross gender roles, French actress Sarah Bernhardt, 1844-1923, who at the age of 46 played the 19 year old Joan of Arc, and Hamlet in May 1899 and then 200 more times. Apparently, she engaged in a fierce sword duel, very masculine, with Laertes, and transformed the moody Dane into an energetic Latin, not a man sickened over with the pale cast of thought. Bernhardt wanted him to fulfill his thought, "If it assume my noble father's person, I will speak to it, though hell itself should gape and bid me hold my peace."

In recent years, movies and theater have featured cross gender performances by prominent players. To name a few: Dustin Hoffman as an unemployed actor playing a woman, *Tootsie*, in 1982, Alec Guinness in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Katherine

Hepburn masquerading as a boy to escape the police in *Sylvia Scarlet*, Robert Williams as Mrs. Doubtfire, Barbra Streisand as Yentl, the rabbinical scholar, and Glenda Jackson playing King Lear.

Women are underrepresented in all levels of decision making, and gender parity is not immediate. However, women, self-determined and economically independent, have been ascending the ladder of success, struggling against discrimination and cultural attitudes that held them back. Doors have been opened, even if no nation has achieved gender equality.

The change in life's chances for women can be seen in the new Bond film, *No Time to Die*. Daniel Craig as Bond appear less misogynistic, and female characters are skilled and more interesting,

In the past Bond films, women have participated in various ways. They performed the title songs; Shirley Bassey's *Goldfinger* is memorable, and the most recent performer 19 year old American Billie Eilish is notable. In 1995 with the film *Golden Eye*, a woman, the celebrated Dame Judy Dench became the head of MI6. After her fictional death, she was replaced by another woman, Ms. Money Penny.

In the new *No Time to Die*, a woman, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, polished up the script of the film. Two related changes are evident in the film. An important character appears as a female agent, Double 00, who is a colleague of Bond, not a Bond girl, and she is a black woman in a serious role. The actress Lashana Lynch, of Jamaican descent, trained for the role by learning boxing and kung fu, and handling guns and knives. She has said she wanted her character to be a real woman, highly competent and skilled, not one dimensional, and not masculine. She also holds that the film has served cultured black women well, "a reflection of where we are in the world."

The gender gap in the U.S., and UK remains though it is declining. Some differences may be due to sexism, but more is due to choices and priorities of women, hours spent at work and the nature of the occupation. Men work longer hours than women and work more overtime shifts, less parenting, while women take more time off and value time and flexibility more than men. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased pre-existing inequalities. The reality is that women are more likely than men to choose the public sector careers, which pay less than private sector jobs. The basis of the inequality problem is that men occupy the senior and higher paying positions.

With these facts in mind the question remains, can or will a woman be the next Bond? If so, what will be her major characteristics and features?